FBI King Probe: 7 John Willards, Laundered Shorts

Associated Press

A pair of men's shorts with an unusual laundry mark was one of the clues FBI agents pursued in their search for the assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, according to newly disclosed FBI files.

Agents also investigated seven men named John Willard because the suspected assassin used that name when he checked into a rooming house near the hotel where King stayed on his fatal visit to Memphis.

Those details emerged in a review of 442 pages of FBI files on investigation of the April 4, 1968, slaying of the civil rights leader. The FBI released the documents from a total of 18,000 pages to comply with requests under the Freedom of Information Act. There was no indication when additional files would be made public.

A House committee is investigating the King slaying.

The first batch of papers dealt with the investigation's early days and did not refer to James Earl Ray, who was arrested in London on June, 8, 1968, and later pleaded guilty to Shooting King. Ray, serving a 99-year prison term, has since recanted and is seeking to change his plea and go to trial.

The papers showed that hundreds of FBI agents chased scores of rumors and tips and tried to use such clues as the shorts and a man's T-shirt to trace the killer's identity. The underwear was found in a suitcase the assassin apparently left at the rooming house.

Agents called on the Textile Marking Machine Co. of Syracuse, N.Y., for help in tracing the laundry markings. The theory was that pinpointing the laundry that washed the assassin's underwear might provide additional clues to his identity and whereabouts.

Calls to all of Textile's sales representatives "disclosed that only one area of the United States (the Northeast) utilitizes this code system," one memo said. Agents were ordered to check out a three-page list of laundries that might have made the marking.

The documents do not indicate whether the laundry mark was ever traced. Nor do they show whether any of the John Willards became involved in the case.

Agents in New York asked the American Express Co. for credit records on anyone named John Willard. The company came up with seven, all with different middle names or initials.

Agents found one John Willard at home in Oxford, Miss., and determined that he had been mowing his lawn at the time King was shot.

Another John Willard in Harlan, Ky., was found to have an "excellent reputation," and at age 65, with a "hurry build., receding hairline, gray hair and moustache," he bore no resemblance to the murder suspect, the Louisville FBI office reported.

Very little of the material dealt with the possibility of a conspiracy to kill King. Some memos indicated that agents investigated whether the Minutemen, a right-wing group, or the Ku Klu Klan had planned the assassination. Leaders of both groups were investigated.

The FBI checked out scores of tips, particularly after newspapers published an artist's sketch of the suspected assassin.

A tipster in San Francisco told of an Air Force buddy who had "said he would kill King if he ever came to Memphis." A woman reported that her husband had been told by an Abilene, Tex., service station attendant about a man who had stopped for gas and "said he was going to Memphis to

take care of the leaders of the demonstration."

Then there was the tipster who led the FBI to his friend.

According to the documents, the friend told agents "he has had dreams of a personal nature for the past 13 months that invariably came true. Early in the morning of April 6, he stated that he had a dream or a vision in which he saw two FBI agents who had a third person in their custody named (deleted) and who was identified as the assassin of Martin Luther King."

The agents wrote without elaboration, "No further action being taken on above."